

Video

SCRATCHING DEEPER

Michael O'Pray

Scratch video made a strong impression last year. It provoked the video art community and enchanted the media. Video art seemed on the verge of coming in out of the cold, but not so: all that seems to have happened is that once again the commercial world has ripped off the arts. I don't think the scratch artists will be too worried about that as it was always part of the game they were playing. Only an idealist could have believed that it would have been otherwise. Nevertheless, scratch should not be judged solely by this relationship, for it also related quite strongly to the art video scene itself where its detractors were legion, some of whom, at least, felt it necessary or opportune to think again about their own practice and the general state of video art in this country.

What was surprising perhaps is that video art was there for the taking by the scratch contingent – it didn't seem to displace an ongoing centre of energy but rather filled a void in what seemed a fragmented and rather tired area. It should also be borne in mind that a new art form, movement or whatever often seems

to reek of bad taste at first, shocks by its preposterousness. And scratch video seemed to have that going for it although unfortunately it is not a sufficient condition. A veteran German avant-garde filmmaker suggested recently that the difference in approach and style between the artists of the 60s and 70s and those of the 80s was drugs – the slow, static camera work of the marijuana haze supplanted by the nervous quick cutting of cocaine. The humour of the remark does not negate the sliver of truth it contains, and in the case of scratch it is its strength that it does reflect the times – it is the definitive video form of the mid-80s. Whilst that is no guarantee of excellence, it does arouse interest. Besides, the scratch work was not all hype and flashy surfaces, it did encapsulate neatly the contradiction at the heart of video between the isolation of art practice and the desire to capture its wayward doppelgänger – broadcast television. If scratch was about to resolve that contradiction, for some the price was too high.

George Barber's new compilation *Scratch Video Volume 2* had the problem of following the astonishingly successful earlier volume which together with the *Death Valley Days* tape by Gorilla Tapes, became probably the most widely seen independent video (excluding the Miners Tapes) last year. Even scratch video supporters must have been nervous with some of the hype it received particularly after last year's reception at the Edinburgh Television Festival. But this new compilation with work by the Duvel Brothers, Girolla Tapes, Goldbacher and Flitcroft

and George Barber himself dispels many of the doubts and fears. The standard is very high and consolidates the two directions or tendencies always embedded in scratch – that of the political and social satire or agit-prop trait and the more 'deconstructive' and imagistic one.

It is no surprise that the distinction between these two tendencies is never quite held in practice. For example, Gorilla Tapes' *Sante Fe Trail* as well as being an attack on Reagan and his policies is also a deconstruction of a Hollywood film both as ideological vehicle and as encapsulating the 'Reagan' persona. Nineteenth-century US cavalry officers look off-shot at a US bomber taking off – Kuleshov montage lives! Gorilla Tapes' skill at delivering the goods without any slack has

VORTEX GALLERY

139-141 Church Street,
Stoke Newington,
London N16.

KATY GUTTMANN

Paintings and Drawings

NICO ISMAY

Paintings, Prints, Pots

28th April–9th May
Monday to Saturday 9.30am–6pm
Sunday 1pm–6pm

Canada House Gallery

Trafalgar Square, London SW1Y 5BJ.
Telephone 01-529 9492 extension 229.
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday 10-5.30,
Thursday 10-7, closed Saturday, Sunday 12-5.30

10 April–6 May

ARTHUR ERICKSON

Selected Projects
1971–1985

An exhibition of architectural
models, drawings and
photographs

UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

M.F.A.

The University of Tasmania offers a two year course leading to the award of a Master of Fine Arts degree. The programme consists of a studio studies component (four-fifths) in either painting, sculpture, photography, printmaking, ceramics or design, and an art theory component (one-fifth). Candidates are allocated a studio on campus with year round, twenty-four hour access.

The School of Art's technical facilities provide for video, photography, printmaking, wood and metal work, plastics and ceramics. There is also a papermill, an art gallery, a substantial library and a visiting artist/lecturer programme.

The academic year in Australia is March through to December.

For further information contact

Geoff Parr, Director, Tasmanian School of Art,
University of Tasmania, G.P.O. Box 252C,
HOBART, Australia, 7001.
Telephone: 002/203274

②

lightly made their work one of scratch's success stories. Their new tape *Till Death to Apartheid* again constructs a political theme in terms of common ideological stances represented by the media itself. Ali Garnett 'watches' Pik Botha on TV and by cleverly editing his remarks, turns the Garnett phenomenon on its head, whilst at the same time linking, perhaps crudely, British fascist tendencies with South African apartheid. The criticism heard in some quarters that the humour drowns the 'message' seems wrong-headed. Humour has always been an important weapon of political debate and struggle. We have only to remember Marx's 'belly-laugh' and Brecht's use of humour. Moreover, for too long the Left in this country has been too readily identified with 'seriousness' or what turns out to be a boring intellectualism as foreign to its potential supporters as much so-called progressive art.

The Duvet Brothers have the problem of following their classic scratch tape *Blue Monday*, and their *Virgin* is broadly successful as agit-prop, but their best piece, also in the compilation, is *Chat Show*, particularly the Player's Cigarette montage edited together so as to mimic the frantic moments of cinema - a close-up of a bottle of Champagne being opened, a tea being delicately wiped away at a concert, a ride on the Big Dipper and the exhalations of smoke from those ubiquitous cigarettes in 1950s British films. Their other tape *Laughing Girls* is a one idea joke using old footage of girls laughing (an acting school?) reworked through sound manipulation and image repetition. It is reminiscent of the found-footage films of the Canadian film-maker David Rimmer, e.g. *The Dance*. Sandra Goldbacher and Kim Elitseroff's tape seemed a throwaway piece merging images from TV adverts, feature films and a Joy Division soundtrack but without the focus of their earlier work.

The highlights of the tape for this reviewer were George Barber's own tapes *Yes Frank*, *No Smoke* and *Absence of Satan*. Barber's role in scratch has been two fold, as its most active promoter - his Volume One being one of the most widely seen tapes last year and the most representative of what scratch was (or was not) - and as one of the most interesting of the artists involved. The promoter role has often overshadowed his work which has always had a quite distinctive 'art-video' feel, although his use of scratch music tracks at times made him seem the only 'true' scratch artist. In these two new tapes Barber reveals a fine control in editing and sound interaction plus a density of ideas and textures which must place him at the



forefront of the deconstruction end of scratch, and perhaps of video art itself as practised in this country. In conversation Barber has mentioned the influence of Stephen Heath, a leading film theorist associated in particular with the semiotic stance of the film magazine *Screen* in the 1970s. The crucial essay is Heath's 'Narrative Space' where he explores the construction of filmic space through its traditional devices (the 180 degree rule, eyeline matches and shot reverse shot). Heath's interest is in the paradox of the illusion of spatial and temporal unity acquired in film through the fragmentation of the image, citing Oshima, Michael Snow and at times, Hitchcock as the horizons of such devices and illusionism in the cinema. Barber is very much working within the framework of these ideas but at the same time not allowing the work to become simply a codicil to a theory.

In *Absence of Satan* Barber has intercut moments from two films - *Absence of Malice* and *The Brotherhood of Satan* - to make literally another film. Employing fragments of dialogue, a dense rhythmic music track and the repeat-edit technique, plus the tracing of off-shot looks through disparate films, he has produced a tape with the density and weight of film, but one which is the 'other' of the classic Hollywood narrative film. *Absence of Satan* is a haunting study in female paranoia and male menace that edits together superficially meaningless sequences and moments from two films to produce something which represents the meaning implicit, at least, in many narrative films - the

women as witness of horror (often only 'seen' off-shot by characters) as the carrier of certain emotions - anxiety, fear and displacement. Thus, a jumble of images from different narratives becomes coherent in their new form and emotional shape. The tracing of looks, the casual phrase, innocent gesture, in other words, all the elements which lend visual and narrative density to a story told in images and which usually escape our attention are reworked by Barber with insight and skill. In Barber's other tape *Yes Frank, No Smoke*, the theme is female panic, the strictures of maleness set against a form of innocence that Barber's cannibalising of two Hollywood films (*The Deep* and *The Blue Lagoon*), allows him to develop. Barber's characteristic interest in images of water, fish and plantation is important here in building rich associations and giving the piece a fluidity always under threat. *Yes Frank, No Smoke* is less a pseudo-narrative, instead it stresses the more formal aspects of framing, creating different areas of movement within the screen particularly in the underwater sequences. Barber plays here with some of the more dubious images of narrative film but manages to transform their connotations with wit and skill, whilst retaining enough of the original context (the rather awful film *The Blue Lagoon*) to create tension for the viewer.

The Scratch Volume 2 compilation tape suggests that scratch is around for a little while longer at least, and the hope that it would lead to new and serious areas for video artists seems to have been fulfilled.

John Hansard Gallery

The University, Southampton SO9 5NH
(0703) 559122 ext. 2158

Mondays-Saturdays 10am-6pm
Admission Free

CANVASS - NEW BRITISH PAINTERS II

21 April - 24 May 1986

Work by David Austen, Stephen Chambers, John Kirby,
Ruth Rosengarten and Mark Wallinger.

ARTS

le and impudence) and the inhibited but hearted English Captain Molyneux (Shaun, a timidly charming) which becomes a distillation of opposing national characteristics without any of its psychological accuracy.

On the opening night Stephen Moore's scheming property thief and woman-stealing villain was sed. This is melodrama, and not all of it is pervious to Irish stereotyping (Gillian Barge has go a long way to account for the Shaughraun's test-beating, consummately dim Oirish other); but the cast plays so infectious, and in such evident fun, that the evening has no hint that fixed-smile deadliness I found in the RSC's attempts at romps like *Fair Maid of the West*. Here a robustness, even a sexiness.

Perhaps the strong young women of the play, feared of their estate a final time and come to connegal for work, might have turned eventually to the oppressed shirt-checkers of *The Factory Girls*. Frank McGuinness' play, like his later, prize-winning *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching to the Somme*, puts a group of differing types of people of one sex in a tight spot in one room and lets this to make them explore their lives.

The five checkers in a shirt factory — who presumably never wear the fruits of their labour — except for the youngest, "girls" only by dint of their subservience within and without the factory walls. Una (Doreen Hepburn) is old enough to remember walking out in wartime with an American GI who dumped her; her mare, the tough-talking Ellen, nicknamed Godzilla (Pat O'Navy), saw her three children die of TB. Rosemary (Tina Kellegher) is the silent one whose rivers run deep, and naturally, in this schematic play, there is a hint of lesbianism. Men are referred to as "old shites": when two of them turn up to force the girls into lower wages they are as incompetent and shabby-minded as their (male) creator can make them. When the women stage a sit-in, a husband exerts moral blackmail to bring her home and the priest refuses their plea of a special Mass. The final moments of the play see the women workers, having gone through an extended group therapy session nearly entirely for our benefit, giving up their protest. The play is saved from its artistic Good Intentions and misery-cataloguing didacticism by the authenticity of its actresses.

My favourite image of the Dublin journalist Neil McCafferty's first play is that of the speaker's mother dancing with her father, torn between the caller in his chest announcing he's kept back his pay and his hand in the small of her back pressing her on to the waltz. Romance is *The Worm in the Heart* in this one-woman monologue, or so its heroine tells us. But on the evidence of its fairly embittered first-generation woman engineer, born to the "last of the full-time mothers", romance is a pretty dodgy concept.

The burden of McCafferty's strange diatribe against the world is that to be Irish and a woman is to be doubly a loser. Set in Southern Ireland, it tells us a bit about subjects ranging from the feminist position on Northern Ireland (there isn't one) to the parliamentary secretaries' occupation of the men's loos in the Dail, in tones which usually contain too much generalised bitterness to be effective. Directed by Gillian Hackett, it does succeed in introducing Londoners to Ruth McCabe, another female Irish performer of awe-

Cooking for terrorists

Julian Petley

Early scratch video was a pirate: it plundered sounds and images, sliced them to shreds, rearranged them regardless of narrative laws. Half a decade on, what's become of it?

NOTHING MORE CLEARLY illustrates capitalism's ability to turn protest into profit than this: the transformation of scratch video from a weapon of guerilla warfare to just another flourish in the ad-men's repertoire of second-hand images.

The fact that scratch has been hijacked, however, shouldn't blind us to its achievements. Looking back at *The Greatest Hits of Scratch*, Volumes One and Two, one is still struck by the considerable, almost Eisensteinian, force of the Duvet Brothers' montages in *Blue Monday*, *War Machine* and *Till Death to Apartheid*, and the sensuous visual and aural qualities of George Barber's *Scratch Free State*, *Tilt*, *Yes Frank No Smoke*, and *Absence of Satan*. It was Barber, in fact, who put the two compilations together — and he has since gone on to become one of the most interesting figures from the scratch moment.

Barber first became seriously involved in video at St Martins College of Art, which he left in 1980. From 1982 to 1984 he studied video at postgraduate level at the Slade, exploring his interest not only in film and television but also in painting. His leanings in these rather different directions resulted in a final show which he describes as "mingling disco music and video art together, without deliberate irony, for the first time".

He says that he has always been drawn to the "lushness of the look of the television and filmic image" and this is certainly borne out by his contributions to the two *Greatest Hits* compilations, which, with surprisingly modest resources, combine highly treated images and equally densely mixed soundtracks. In particular *Yes Frank No Smoke* stunningly resumes the watery images that haunt Barber's work, taking under-sea shots from *The Deep* and *The Blue Lagoon* and completely reworking them in a way that enhances their visual qualities and divorces them from their original narrative purposes. Meanwhile, *The Brotherhood of Satan* and *Absence of Malice* are ransacked and re-integrated in *Absence of Satan*: mundane actions, casual phrases, everyday gestures are repeated over and over to chime with the pounding pulse of the soundtrack, rendering the familiar strange and achieving moments of lyricism as powerful as they are mysterious.

On the basis of such work, it isn't surprising that Barber was selected as the first recipient of a grant (about £2,000) from the £50,000 video fund which the BFI Production Board set up last year. The result, *Taxi Driver 2*, bears comparison with Mark Wilcox's *Calling the Shots* (reviewed NS 15 April).

Here, Barber's evident fascination with the glittering surface of Hollywood imagery moves away from an exploration of the play of surface

flow, from stripping images of their narrative significance and working on their purely formal qualities, towards articulating a new narrative structure. This revolves around Tim West, an advertising executive who is also developing a C4 programme on cooking for terrorists. Disillusioned by the hyper-reality of the media world, he joins a Robert de Niro evening class, but also falls under the pastoral influence of Johnny Morris.

From the opening images of night-time, car-ridden streets accompanied by languorous sax on the soundtrack, through to the sub-Chandleresque voice-over narration ("My name is Tim West, I've always been a bit of a loner at the ad agency") *Taxi Driver 2* strikes you with its sly knowingness. But it's more than just a clever-clever nod in the direction of contemporary *film noir*, just as it's more than an incestuous joke at the expense of the London-based media world: it is also a telling comment on the contemporary media culture of postmodernism. As Tim's voice-over puts it, while the endless traffic rolls on: "At work 100, maybe 200 ideas are thought up every day, but when I go home at night and lie down they all seem the same." In this context, the macho movie posturings of De Niro are as much of a dead-end response to modern urban angst as the gender illusions conjured by Johnny Morris' TV persona.

Similar concerns run through *The Venetian Ghost*, also funded by the BFI (though at £10,000 this cost a good deal more than its predecessor). Here, the ghost of an 18th-century Venetian Doge finds itself living in a shallow, superficial household on Venice Beach, California. The role of the ghost was originally envisaged for Spaulding Gray and much of the humour emerges from the Doge's comments on the soap-style domestic dramas of Charlie, his unwitting host. But the real strength of the video is in its elegiac, melancholy shots of amusement parks, freeways, streets and shopping malls over which the Doge muses Kundera-like on life in the perpetual present: "To Charlie the only thing important in life is style and good times. It's funny living with a guy with no memory."

Fuzzy shots of Venice alternate with images of American consumerdom as the Doge ponders on how "people today spend so much time thinking how life could be. Everywhere you look there are pictures telling you how to lead your life, but when I look at them all I see is death... How people long for these things while deliberately letting them pass by". In the end, of course, Charlie and his ilk come to seem even more insubstantial than the ghost, the Doge's Venice more real than the soulless, memoryless streets, shops and beaches.

Both *Taxi Driver 2* and *The Venetian Ghost* refuse to fit easily into video art or narrative fiction categories, but that is precisely the source of their fascination and pleasure. An analogy might perhaps be found in Godard, circa *Duex ou trois choses*, where the narrative is constantly and playfully fractured by other elements, where different kinds of narration jostle against each other, where lyricism and humour overlap and a particular story is "enlarged" in such a way as to take on wider resonances.

With the exception of "The Venetian Ghost", all of George Barber's videos are available from London Video Arts, 23 Fifth Street, London W1V 5TS. "The Venetian Ghost" will be shown next month at the Piccadilly Film Festival.